The Washington Post

AN INDEPENDENT NEWSPAPER

The President's Turn in Panama

THE PRESIDENT'S delay in moving to consummate negotiations for a new Panama Canal treaty threatens to produce at least three kinds of damage. First, despite the Panamanian government's efforts to maintain control, it may be impossible to prevent riots or sabotage that would deny the United States and other nations the continued, efficient use of this major international waterway. Second, failure to negotiate a treaty would inflame American relations not only with Panama but also with all other Latin American nations that are united on this issue as on no other—in both philosophy and diplomatic position. American failure to set aside the "big stick" with which Teddy Roosevelt acquired the Canal Zone, and to move into a new association respecting Panama's sovereignty, would be condemned everywhere. Finally, Mr. Ford, by having created a messy and unnecessary crisis on the U.S. doorstep, would project the image of a President unable to handle foreign affairs—an image that can only hurt his prospects for re-election next year.

With these negative prospects so unmistakable, why then is Mr. Ford dragging his feet on a new treaty? It has been 18 months, after all, since his Secretary of State promised, in Panama: "In the President's name, I hereby commit the United States to complete this negotiation successfully and as quickly as possible." And it has been more than four months since negotiations with Panama were effectively suspended. The reason for the suspension was a disagreement between the Defense Department and the State Department over how the U.S. relationship with Panama ought to be changed.

The Pentagon's attitude is perhaps best conveyed by the fact that, though seaplanes went out of use years ago, the Navy has wished to retain a seaplane ramp site in Panama for "contingency planning." With just such inflated and over-anxious conceptions of its own defense responsibilities, the Pentagon has resisted efforts to return control of the Canal Zone and canal to Panama. The period of return contemplated in a new treaty, by the way—a period in which the United States would retain major rights—stretches out over several decades. It is not as though the American flag were to be hauled down tomorrow. And it is not as though, once the Panamanian flag alone were flying in the Zone, that the United States would allow itself to be shut out of the canal. On that point surely the Panamanians have no illusions: Unrestricted transit will remain a vital interest that the United States can be expected, at almost any cost, and by almost any means, to protect.

The State Department, on the other hand, has argued —persuasively, in our view—that the best way to ensure continued American use of the canal is to make a new treaty that will drain off the nationalist bitterness that the Panamanians feel about the old one. Teddy Roosevelt's Secretary of State conceded, at the time, that the 1903 treaty was "vastly advantageous to the United States, and we must confess, not so advantageous to Panama." What hurt the Panamanians most was the treaty provision granting the United States control over its most vital resource—a swath cutting the country in half—"in perpetuity." No modern nation can be expected to tolerate such a legacy of imperialism. And since riots or sabotage are the only likely threat to the canal, it makes all the more sense to take a diplomatic step—a new treaty—that will at least reduce if not eliminate the possibility that the threat will become a reality. Not making the new treaty, in our view, very nearly guarantees that this threat will in fact materialize, and under conditions that promise no sympathy for the United States from the rest of the hemisphere.

Mr. Ford, however, so far has not chosen to break the bureaucratic impasse that preparation of an American negotiating position has reached. The apparent reason is that he fears a political backlash from the rightwing conservative elements that are tightly organized to maintain the status quo. Some of his political advisers have been telling him that it would be "political suicide" on the eve of an election year to hand to the likes of Ronald Reagan the ammunition that an enlightened treaty stance might provide. We submit, however, that Mr. Ford ought not to allow himself to be intimidated by the specter of a backlash on this issue. Just before Congress went on holiday, for instance, more than 60 senators agreed to oppose an anti-treaty resolution being prepared by Sen. Harry Byrd (I-Va.)—an impressive display of pro-treaty strength. If the Joint Chiefs of Staff were to swing publicly behind a reasonable negotiating position, then the opposition in Congress and the country would surely be reduced to a manageable hard core.

President Ford, then, has no good reason that we can see for allowing questionable political and bureaucratic considerations to stand in the path of an action that the national interest plainly requires. He should stop following a course—delay—that could provoke canal-closing riots and that could cost the United States heavily in its international relations, especially in Latin America. He should move promptly to complete negotiations on a new treaty with Panama.

Parade of Disclosures

Other Voices . . .

Helsinki Summit

Not since the Congress of Vienna in 1814-15 has there been such a gathering of European heads of government as . . . the Helsinki Summit. . . . Then as now there were those who hoped the Congress . . . would advance the cause of peace. . . . With all its faults the Vienna Congress did introduce a period of relative peace and stability. . . . The Helsinki declaration is shot through with expediency and opportunism. . . . But there will be some slight loosening of the barriers that hampered the free movement of information, ideas, and people. . . .

—The Globe and Mail, Toronto (independent).

Greater human freedom was a Western objective for the conference but the interests and hopes of these people have been submerged in the higher diplomacy of detente, the big deal between the U.S. and Russia.

—Toronto Star (independent).

At worst the Helsinki agreement will be a psychological constraint against bad behavior and a return to East-West tensions and the cold war. At best it may lay the groundwork for greater trust.

—Jonathan Steele, The Guardian, Manchester (liberal).

To justify their participation in the biggest hoax of the postwar period, German leaders blamed the insistence of our allies, especially the U.S. . . . What a strange pretext for backsliding!

—Die Welt, Hamburg (conservative).

All people see now what great results are brought about by the consistent implementation of the ideas of peaceful coexistence . . . the broadest prospects loom ahead for the further consolidation of detente.

—Pravda, Moscow (Communist Party).

David S. Broder

The Fading Promise of the 94th

Standing in the Speaker's lobby, just off the floor of the House of Representatives, on the day before Congress quit for its August recess, one of the members of the famous freshman Democratic class of 1974 was asked how he would explain Congress' record to his constituents.

"I don't even try to defend Congress any more," he said. "I just try to defend my own votes."

It was a sad epitaph to the effort that began so boldly last December and January to make this 94th Congress something different from its predecessors and more worthy of public esteem.

The 92 freshmen were bright and talented. But what made them distinctive was their eagerness to assume individual responsibility for the performance of Congress as an institution.

The Democrats among them—who comprised three-fourths of the party —asserted that corporate responsibility by expanding the power of their ma-

gress has ever known—the refusal to call his committee into session.

Madden's action drew no censure from the Democrats, who would have been outraged if an old-style Dixie chairman had used the same tactic to prevent a vote on a civil rights bill—and for a very simple reason.

The Democrats had no wish to be confronted again with the dilemma presented by the Turkish arms aid question. They had voted their inclinations the first time around. Continuing the arms embargo, which had failed in its stated purpose of bringing a Cyprus settlement, was a way of satisfying the most vocal of their constituents. It also told Henry Kissinger, who is a well-despised figure on Capitol Hill these days, that Congress would not jump through his foreign policy hoop on command.

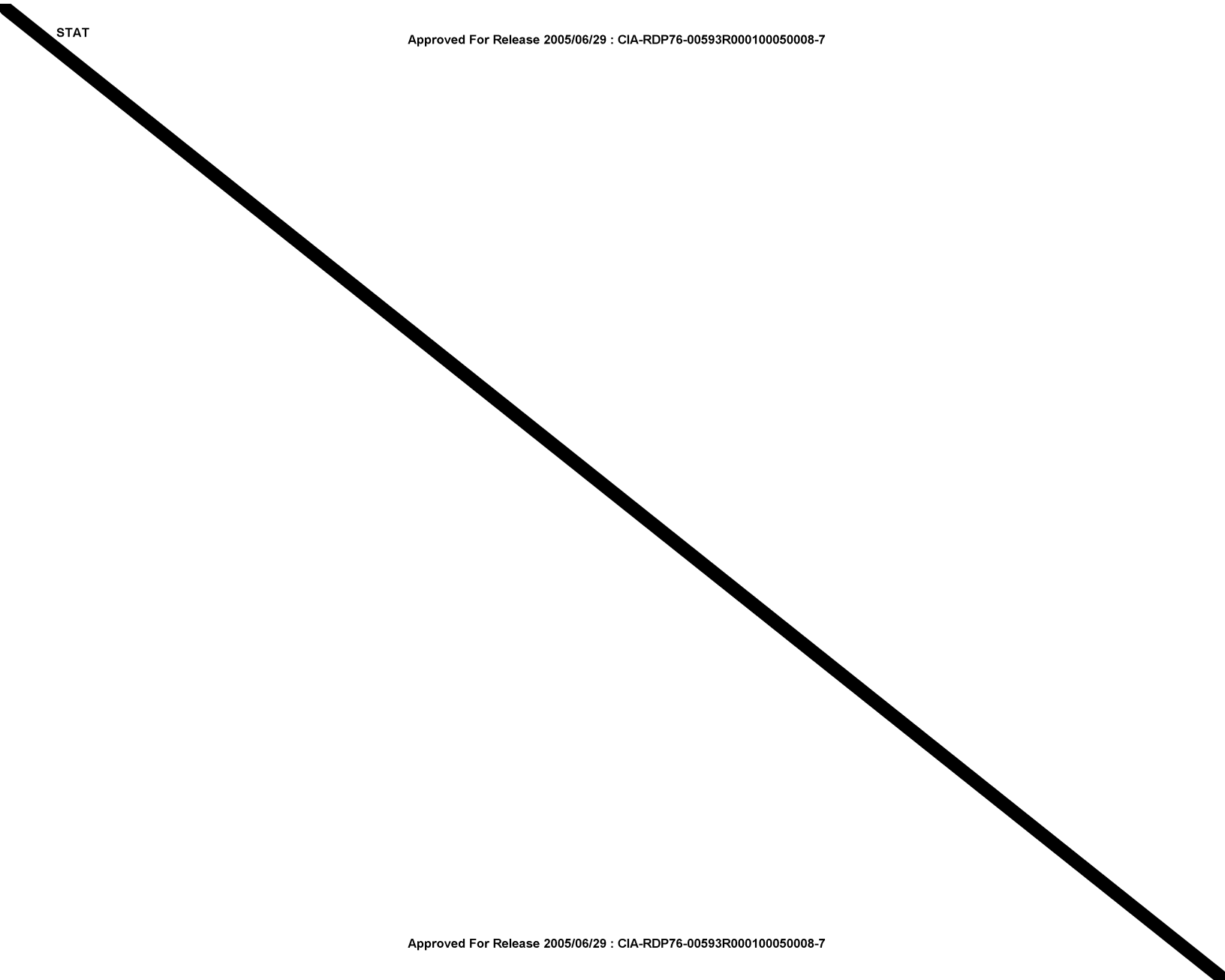
Unfortunately for the Congress, Kissinger in this instance was quickly proved right. The Turks shut down important American bases; the President warned in stern language that

a reasonable final compromise offer from the President for gradual decontrol of oil prices. Instead, they elected to invite a veto battle, which could well leave the country with no safeguard at all against sharp, sudden price increases that could well abort the emerging economic recovery.

Again, as on the Turkish aid question, the members of Congress, who eight months ago were so eager to make the tough choices, elected to take the easy way out. Many of the freshmen Democrats had been elected on promises to fight the "greedy oil companies" and roll back the cost of gas. Most of them now know that is a phantom war and a phony promise. But they are not yet ready to tell their constituents that expensive energy is a fact of life for America's future.

They earlier rejected the proposal that Democrats on the House Ways and Means Committee had devised to let those inevitable price increases come in gradually, while recycling the money back into the economy through a tax on gasoline.

Making Public Buildings Public



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